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ABSTRACT

In response to decreasing retention of the average freshman due to many anxiety-causing factors, the Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGs) program was instituted at the University of Missouri (UMC). A study explored the idea of FIGs to see if they are instrumental in providing emotional and task support in the university setting. A survey was administered to 44 students in two sections of the basic communication course to evaluate the effects of FIG membership on students' level of satisfaction with task and emotional support received within their respective group. One section consisted of FIG participants, and the other section of non-FIG participants. To assure levels of satisfaction on the informational, task, and emotional levels, the Social Support Survey (SSS-C) was modified to the research population and context. The concept of FIGs is a growing trend in medium and large-sized universities to address the complaints of "being a number." This research with learners at UMC does not generally support this trend. Statistical comparison (t-tests) between FIG (n=19) and non-FIG (n=25) participants showed no significant relationship between membership and perceived levels of task or emotional support. Initially, FIG participants have more communication exchanges per week than non-FIG participants, but frequency did not translate into different levels of satisfaction between the two groups. The main limitation is that the population size is probably too insignificant to generalize findings to the FIG program as a whole. (A sample survey is appended; contains 14 references.) (NKA)

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Introduction

Because stress is omnipresent in human beings on many levels, it has become increasingly important to keep burnout from reaching dysfunctional levels (Ray, 1991). Whether one is a corporate professional, educator, or student, at one time in the process known as life, stress will have a negative impact. Intervention in the stress process needs to come early. Social support in the form of communities and collectivities are being utilized to combat stress and contribute to the individuals sense of physical and mental well-being (Richman et al., 1993). Negative stress can lead to depression, loneliness, and a general unwillingness to participate. The university setting posits itself, willingly, into this stress related scenario.

The typical college student suffers from an enormous amount of stress cumulatively formed by a new setting, anxiety, increased expectations, and a need to succeed. As a result of these factors, many students simply find the stress of the university experience overwhelming, and therefore quit the educational process. In response to decreasing retention of the average freshmen due to many anxiety causing factors (Wingspread Conference, 1993), the Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGs) program was instituted at the University of Missouri (UMC). The program really has two interrelated functions. FIGs are used to give the college student a sense of identity and reduce unfamiliarity and anxiety. Second, the FIGs concept has also shown to be an appropriate tool to keep the student in school which has become increasingly important at large universities who are feeling the economic impact of decreasing enrollments. In either scenario, the FIGs concept seems to be a vehicle to help students and the universities concurrently.

This study seeks to explore the idea of the FIGs to see if they are instrumental in providing emotional and task support in the university setting. The well-being of the average college student and economic health of UMC seems appropriate justifications for the work that follows. After a brief review of social support, research hypotheses are

presented, and the method utilized is discussed. Finally, results and implications are presented for students and the UMC.

Social Support Literature

The nature of the world, workplace, and even educational setting, is one of several priorities all pulling and tugging at individuals at the same time. Ray (1991) states "over the past ten years, communication scholars have been grappling with understanding the relationship of supportive communication to job stress and burnout" (p. 91 & 92). Clearly, the importance of positive personal relationship in reducing stress has been well-documented (Albrecht et al., 1982). Interpersonal relationships on the job and in the educational setting can be helpful in mitigating the effects of negative stress. This review will discuss the frequency of communication exchanges in building supportive relationship, building community in an environment such as the university, and using the community of FIGs to increase social support.

Frequency

Communication exchanges between group members can be important simply because of frequency. Having a mutually supportive relationship based solely on frequency of communication is not new (Albrecht et al., 1982). This pattern of thinking clearly makes the assumption simply talking to someone about the problem or situation would lead to a type of emotionally supportive relationship. Ray (1991) makes the argument surrounding frequency that "the strength of the link is determined by the frequency of interaction" (p. 92). Once again, increasing the amount of interactions in the form of communication exchanges supposedly should strengthen the supportive network in which an individual exists. Missing from the argument is the context of the communication exchange, the nature of the relationship, and the satisfaction of the participants with the communication exchanges. Scholarship has assumed the more contacts (or exchanges) present, the more social support evident.

This line of scholarship, more communication leads to greater satisfaction was challenged by communication researchers such as Morgan (1989) and Nussbaum (1985). Nussbaum's study (1985) suggested people are experiencing more communication and these exchanges have not led to greater satisfaction. As Peterson (1995) suggests "numerous studies have called into question the notion that more communication leads to greater satisfaction" (p. 156). Clearly, there is a controversy between whether more exchanges actually can be equated to greater leads of satisfaction. These specific studies, in juxtaposition to each other, show the inherent need to study whether or not people can be emotionally satisfied simply with the frequency of communication exchanges.

Building Community

The process of building a community filling the role of a social support process is not an easy task. To start with, social support comes in three broad categories-tangible, informational, and emotional support (Cobb, 1976). This seemingly suggests in order to build community structures that provide social support, particular communities must provide tangible task support, must supply informational and "need to know" support, and provide emotional support to it's active participants to make the idea of community a successful one.

To try and increase achievement and improve student learning on college campuses, learning communities were born (A Success Story, 1996). The notion put forth here was to build a learning community providing task, informational, and emotional support for students within the campus community. Astin (1985) defined a learning community as "a small group of students with a similar sense of purpose" (p. 3). These sub groups, set up by Student Life Departments on universities, would help initiate a sense of community providing for all parts of the aforementioned social support process. Communication in some form is central to the initiation of the building of community; communities arise, exist, and die through communication (Proctor, 1990). The argument then becomes very simple. Communities are built by entities (universities) to foster

emotional, informational, and task support. By placing students in learning communities, administrators are hoping an increased level of the social support process comes to fruition and students learn more, achieve more, and are more apt to graduate (A Success Story, 1996). What continues to be unclear is at what level of frequency of interactions does community actually get built. Are participants satisfied with their respective levels of support?

FIGS and Social Support

The University of Missouri-Columbia took community building and the social support process one step further when it set up and administered the Freshmen Interest Group (FIG) program. The FIGs concept was started in 1995 (FIGs and Other Communities, 1997) to provide students with a sense of community, encourage interaction, and enhance academic success (A Success Story, 1996). To date, most community building programs on universities have stressed common academic themes in the group. UMC has taken this one step further; not only are FIGs built around common student interests, participants are also required to live in close proximity to one another in a residence hall. Blimling (1993) found that students living in residence halls structured around academic themes had higher levels of achievement. The FIGs concept hopes to build community and social support through common academic groups further encouraging emotional, task, and informational support. This is achieved by housing students in close proximity. There is a decided lack of systematic research between FIGs and retention, achievement, and satisfaction. The assumption made by universities employing the FIGs concept is students join the learning community. In turn, the learning community provides better frequency of interaction and exchanges thus decreasing participants isolation. Because the students in the FIGs interact more, there is an increase likelihood participants receive more task, emotional, and social support from other members. Inherently then, it is claimed increasing the social support process (task, emotional, social) through FIGs interaction makes students more satisfied with themselves

and UMC. The assumption of FIGs and increased levels of social support, higher level of communication exchanges, and greater levels of student satisfaction is not sufficiently addressed by current research.

Research Hypotheses

Even though it may be important to gauge the frequency of interactions between FIG and non-FIG participants, it is more appropriate to understand whether or not participants are satisfied with the level of support received from their respective learning communities. My belief is FIG participants receive more support than non-FIG participants. Thus:

H_1 FIG participants are more satisfied with the task support they receive than non-FIG participants.

H_2 FIG participants are more satisfied with the emotional support they receive than non-FIG participants.

After levels of satisfaction are addressed, this researcher believes because of higher levels of satisfaction, FIG participants are more satisfied with the college experience. This satisfaction will manifest itself in two ways:

H_3 FIG participants are more likely to intend to graduate here at UMC than non-FIG participants.

H_4 FIG participants are more likely to recommend UMC to others.

To help alleviate the dichotomy existing between communication theory that says communication frequency is related to social support and communication frequency us bit related to social support, I propose these hypotheses:

H_5 There is a relationship between frequency of communication exchanges/interactions and satisfaction with emotional support for FIG participants.

H_6 There is a relationship between frequency of communication exchanges/interactions and satisfaction with task support for FIG participants.

H_7 There is a relationship between frequency and communication exchanges/interactions and satisfaction with emotional support for non-FIG participants.

H_8 There is a relationship between frequency of communication exchanges/interactions and satisfaction with task support for non-FIG participants.

Method

I distributed a survey to evaluate the effects of FIG membership on students level of satisfaction with task and emotional support received within their respective group. Additionally, the survey also sought whether or not FIG participants were more likely to intend to graduate at UMC and whether or not they would recommend UMC to others. Finally, I sought to understand if there was a relationship between the frequency of communication interactions and perceptions of emotional and task support. Investigation led into the overall idea that frequency of communication exchanges can serve as a predictor of perceived social support.

Participants

Students at a large midwestern university in two sections of the basic communication course were selected. A total of 44 participants were administered the survey, one section primarily FIG participants (n=19) and the other section non-FIG participants (n=25).

Diversity of the sample was represented by 23 academic majors on campus although pre-journalism was a popular major in the FIG block (n=10). The non-FIG group consisted of 19 different majors with no one academic unit being unrepresentative.

Procedures

Participants received a consent form and a three page survey to fill out before class time. Although there was no strict adherence to time allotted, all participants completed the survey within 10 minutes. The survey instructions were read to both groups before administration.

Instrument

To measure levels of satisfaction on the informational, task, and emotional levels, the Social Support Survey (SSS-C) was modified (see Appendix) to the research population and context (Richman et al., 1993). The SSS-C consists of eight forms of social support each containing four questions. Task support is measured by task appreciation and task challenge survey questions. Emotional support is measured by emotional challenge, emotional support, and personal assistance survey questions. Richman et al (1993) states

> "These eight forms of social support provide a typology for the development of a practice model that defines and explains the interaction between individuals and groups as social support is given and received in the environmental context" (p. 291)

The SSS-C has usefulness because it provides an array of support the researcher may find useful in assessing social support in contexts. Structural and concurrent validity of the SSS-C was measured by Richman et al (1993) in their SSS-C validation study published in Research on Social Work Practice.

Structural validity results indicated that the four questions posed for each form of support (of the eight), although somewhat overlapping, measure distinct aspects of each form of support (Richman et al., 1993).

Concurrent validity of the SSS-C instrument was done by comparison with Norbeck et al.'s (1981) social support questionnaire (Richman et al., 1993). Norbeck et al.'s questionnaire has been tested adequate for concurrent, discriminant, predictive, and construct validity (Norbeck et al., 1983). Statistically significant positive correlations were found between three of the four SSS-C emotional support variables and Norbeck's variable: .63 ($p \leq .01$) and .52 ($p \leq .05$) for providers and satisfaction respectively (Richman et al., 1993).

Analysis

The modification of the SSS-C allowed for the measurement of task and emotional support satisfaction (dependent variable) as it pertains to FIG and non-FIG membership (independent variable)

Second, the survey was constructed to show intention to graduate and recommend UMC to others (dependent variable) as it applies to FIG and non-FIG participants (independent variable). What I sought to understand with this research design is whether or not satisfaction manifests itself in participants willingness to stay here at UMC or recommend UMC to others

Finally, the SSS-C was modified to see if the frequency of FIG participants communication exchanges were a significant predictor of their satisfaction with emotional and task support received from their respective FIG. Conversely, non-FIG participants were asked the same question to see if communication exchanges were a predictor of their level of satisfaction

Results

The modified SSS-C was administered to a population of students taking the basic fundamentals speech course at UMC (n=44). 19 participants belong to a FIG and 25 students were not presently enrolled in the FIG (although one student was a previous member)

Relationships Between Groups

The survey was constructed to measure the relationship between group membership and the amount of task support, emotional support, intention to graduate at UMC, and likelihood of recommending UMC to other peers

Task support. Statistical analysis showed no significant difference on how FIG participants and non-FIG participants viewed task support supplied by their respective groups. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being very satisfied), their means were almost identical. FIG members scored 3.684 versus 3.580 for non-FIG members. Reported $t(42) = .02$, $p \leq$ is

n.s. On perceived levels of satisfaction with task support, there was no significant difference between FIG and non-FIG members, thus hypothesis one was unsupported.

Emotional support. Analysis of emotional support showed no significant difference between the two groups. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being very satisfied), the mean of responses was 3.84 and 3.76 for FIG and non-FIG participants respectively. Reported, $t(42) = .31$, $p \leq$ is n.s. On perceived levels of satisfaction with emotional support, there was no significant difference between groups, leaving hypothesis two unsupported.

Intention to graduate at UMC. The likelihood of a greater number of FIG participants intending to graduate at UMC was the focus of hypothesis three. There were significant differences between the groups, $t(42) = 2.72$, $p \leq .05$. However, the analysis indicated non-FIG participants were more likely to intend to graduate at UMC than FIG participants. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being most likely to graduate here at UMC), the means were 4.36 and 5.00 for FIG and non-FIG participants, indicating non-FIG participants plan to stay and graduate at UMC. Statistical analysis did show significant differences between the groups but in the opposite direction, thus, hypothesis three was unsupported.

Recommend to others. Hypothesis four stated FIG participants were more likely to recommend UMC to others which was unsupported by statistical analysis. The $t(42) = 1.87$, $p \leq .05$ does show significant differences between the groups, but in a direction opposite of what hypothesis four projected.

Relationship Between Frequency of Exchanges and Support

The last four hypotheses all revolved around the idea of the relationship (if any) between frequency of communication exchanges and satisfaction with emotional and task support for FIG and non-FIG members. Reported results of the correlations of communication exchanges and levels of emotional and task support for the FIG and non-FIG participants are in Table 1.

Table 1 Correlation Between Frequency and Support Satisfaction

Group	(df)Correlation	pLevel
FIG-Emotional Support	(42)- 0345	412, n s
FIG-Task Support	(42)- 0111	472, n s
Non-FIG Emotional Support	(42)- 0181	454, n s
Non-FIG Task Support	(42)- 0861	289, n s

There is no correlation or association with frequency of communication exchanges and emotional or task support for either research group. The frequency of the exchanges is not associated with FIG or non-FIG participants satisfaction with the level of emotional or task support received from their respective groups. Hypotheses 5 through 8 were unsupported based on results above (Table 1).

Using frequency to predict satisfaction. Because of the low or non-existence of a correlation between frequency of communication exchanges and levels of task/emotional satisfaction, frequency is not an accurate predictor of emotional or task support satisfaction. With $F(2, 41) = .0557$, $R^2 = .0027$, $p \leq$ n.s., this multiple regression analysis indicates that the frequency of interactions is not an indicator of emotional support satisfaction for either group. This tends to support the correlation statistical analyses present in Table 1.

Discussion

The concept of FIGs is a growing trend in medium and large size universities to address the complaints of "being a number." In hoping to get newly oriented freshmen in a community of learners supporting their emotional, interpersonal, and task satisfaction, UMC has adopted the FIG approach. This research, based on a relatively small ($n = 44$) population, does not generally support this trend.

Statistical comparison (t-tests) between FIG (n = 19) and non-FIG (n = 25) participants showed no significant relationship between membership and perceived levels of task or emotional support. This seemingly indicates membership in a FIG is not a prerequisite for emotional or task support from peers in the classroom, residence hall, or the university population. Second, FIG membership was not positively associated with intentions to stay at UMC and graduate. Indications from the t-tests indicate the exact opposite from hypothesis three, students not involved in the FIG are more likely to intend to graduate at UMC for whatever reasons. Third, FIG membership doesn't constitute the notion of the certainty of recommending UMC to others. On the contrary, non-FIG members are more apt to recommend UMC to others across the population. Fourth, there is no significant relationship between frequency of communication exchanges and satisfaction levels of emotional/task support for either group. Simply having students together and talking does not assure they will be satisfied with the emotional and task support they received.

Implications

Even though there were no significant findings reported supporting the eight hypotheses, there were still a few significant implications of this study. Initially, FIG participants have more communication exchanges per week (mean = 13.8) than non-FIG participants (mean = 8.2). Frequency does not translate into different levels of satisfaction between the two groups. This could be because the task/emotional support given is the support not needed, doesn't address the problem, or makes students feel falsely okay (Richman et al., 1993). Second, group membership is also not an indicator of satisfaction with social support needed, intentions to stay and graduate, or willingness to recommend UMC to others. Social relationships and social support does not always enhance the recipients well-being (Rook, 1992). In some situations, support within the FIG could have alienated some students because non-FIG students have a statistical significant higher level of intending to graduate here at UMC and willingness to recommend UMC to others.

Even though the concept of FIGs may be appropriate at other institutions, this analysis calls that assumption into question.

Limitations

The population size (n = 44) is probably too insignificant to generalize findings to the FIG program as a whole here at UMC and to other institutions utilizing the FIG concept. Because FIGs here at UMC are organized around a general theme, the one FIG selected was filled with a majority of one or two majors. Limited variation within the group could also have influenced the results.

Recommendations

This study found no statistical differences between FIG and non-FIG participants in relation to their levels of satisfaction with emotional and task support received. However, research design was problematic. The FIG and non-FIG population size (n = 44) was small. Perhaps a comparison using a FIG group from each thematic unit could be used. This enlarging of the sample size would help generalizability. Second, the non-FIG group could use only freshmen so as to have a more accurate comparison between the two groups. Third, statistical comparison could also be done with a significant number of upperclassmen who have prior experience participating with the FIGs. Longitudinal analysis of those participants one, two, or three years removed from the FIG program might be a better measurement of the ability of FIGs to attract and retain students.

Summary

This study sought to explore the difference between social support satisfaction for FIG members and non-FIG members. The frequency of communication exchanges being associated with levels of satisfaction was also discussed for both groups. In this study, there was little significant relationships between satisfaction with emotional/task support and FIG membership. Given this premise, more study on the concept of FIGs is clearly warranted.

Appendix

Survey for Social Support and Communication Exchanges

My name is Kelly B. Larson and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Communication. This survey seeks to look at social support received by students at the University of Missouri. I find it necessary to define the following definitions:

communication exchanges: dialogue with other students that extends beyond the greeting of "hi" or other opening greetings. For example, if student "Jane Doe" meets student "John Doe" and just says "hello", for purposes of this survey that is not a communication exchange. If the students talk after the opening greeting of "hello", no matter what the length, that is considered an exchange.

small group: the group you are assigned to by the instructor. You are in either A, B, or C.

emotional support: support given to you by others including listening and empathy about personal subjects which may include school related topics.

task support: the help on group or other school related assignments only.

Please answer the following question(s) to the best of your ability. Answer only the ones relevant to you.

Year in school _____ Academic Major _____

Are you currently enrolled in the freshmen interest group(FIG) program?

Yes___ No___

Have you previously participated in the FIG program?

Yes___ No___

FIG members should answer questions on this page and pages ***2 and 4.***

Non-FIG members should answer questions on this page and pages ***3 and 4.***

The following questions are for people currently enrolled in the FIG program. People not involved in the FIG should go to the next page.

How many individuals in your FIG provided you with emotional support during the last week? _____

How many individuals in your FIG provided you with task support during the last week? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have with other FIG members during Comm 75 class? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have with other FIG members outside of Comm 75 class? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have with students that are not members of your FIG in Comm 75? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have with students that are not members of your FIG outside of Comm 75 class? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have with members of your small group (A, B,. or C) in Comm 75? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have with members of your small group outside of Comm 75 class? _____

This page is for NON-FIG participants only. FIG members should precede to the last page.

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have in Comm 75 with other students? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have outside of class with students from Comm 75? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have in class with members of your small group (a, b, or c)? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have in class with people not in your small group? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have outside of class with your small group members? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have outside of Comm 75 with Comm 75 classmates not in your small group? _____

How many communication exchanges (on the average during the week) do you have with students not from Comm 75 outside of the Comm 75 class? _____

Emotional Support **(All participants should answer these questions)**

How many individuals in your Comm 75 small group provided you with emotional support during the last week? _____

How many individuals in your Comm 75 small group provided you with task support during the last week? _____

In general, how satisfied are you with the quality of emotional support you receive while at MU as a student?(from your respective group)

1 2 3 4 5
Very Very
Dissatisfied Satisfied

In general, how satisfied are you with the quality of task support you receive while at MU as a student? (while a member of your group)

1 2 3 4 5
Very Very
Dissatisfied Satisfied

Are you satisfied with the course (Comm 75)?

1 2 3 4 5
Very Very
Dissatisfied Satisfied

Are you satisfied with your grade in the course (Comm 75)?

1 2 3 4 5
Very Very
Dissatisfied Satisfied

Do you intend to graduate here at UMC? Recommend UMC to others?

1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5
Unlikely Likely Unlikely Likely

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